Acting Choices/Filmic Choices:
Rethinking Montage and Performance

CYNTHIA BARON

MONTAGE HAS BEEN SEEN AS THE ESSENCE OF CINEMA for so long that revisiting that point seems simpleminded. Yet it is worth returning to that key principle because new perspectives on screen performance come into view when montage is understood as the selection and combination of all cinematic elements.

It is useful to recall that Eisenstein opposed a definition of montage that narrowly equated it with the selection and combination of shots alone. He located the principle of montage in haiku poetry, Japanese landscape painting, and novels by Charles Dickens. Attentive to the dynamic elements within a single frame, Eisenstein's writings and films give credence to the connotative power of different textures, tones, and amplitudes. They explore the connotative potential of distinctions between direct and flexible movement, sudden and sustained movement, bound and free-flowing movement. For Eisenstein, the logic for selecting and combining images can arise from the images themselves; as he points out, "in rhythmic montage it is movement within the frame that impels the montage movement from frame to frame" (75). The logic can also be based on the emotional "sound of the pieces" (76)—a sequence with a shrill emotional tone might be created by selecting and combining images with "many

acutely angled elements" (76); a subtext or secondary tone can be created by adding visual or audio details to emphasize selected aspects of the tone or meaning established by the principle elements of the sequence. For Eisenstein, montage does not involve simply the combination of images, but also the selection of those images.

In studies of screen performance, it is vital to revisit ideas about montage because they have played such a crucial role in established views of film acting (see Pudovkin; Leyda). With Eisenstein's insights about montage largely ignored, screen performance has often been seen as the product of mechanically recorded inert matter that is combined, meaningless block by meaningless block, until meaning is created. Put another way, acting in the cinema has been equated with "received acting," in which the representation of character is attributed to performers due to costuming or context (Kirby 5). Returning, however, to Eisenstein's ideas makes it possible to see cinema as an art form in which montage or collage technique informs the orchestration of all cinematic elements. From this perspective, performance elements are not the product of framing and editing but instead are on par with all other cinematic elements.

By revisiting Eisenstein's views on montage, one can see that the selection and combination of actors' movements, gestures, and expressions can have a mutually interactive relationship with the selection and combination of shots, editing patterns, design elements, and audio choices. Integral links between acting

CYNTHIA BARON is an associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University. She is coeditor of *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Wayne State, 2004) and coauthor of *Reframing Screen Performance* (U of Michigan, forthcoming).

choices and filming choices are possible because performances are not grounded in some noncinematic principle. Instead, the selection and combination of movements, gestures, and vocal/facial expressions are themselves mutually interactive elements in the performance montage that actors and directors create. When montage is understood as the process of both selection and combination in film, choices about framing, editing, production, and sound design can actually be seen as implicit choices about performance, and acting choices can be seen as implicit choices about other cinematic strategies.

Performance details are integral elements of a film's audiovisual design; they are not produced by an assemblage of shots that contain audiovisual pieces with no specific qualities. Analysis of films based on the same story/script is one of the best ways for filmmakers and film scholars to see how frame selection, shot duration, production design, sound design, and the character and amplitude of actors' movements, gestures, and expressions are coordinated to create meaning in films; this is so, in part, because changing conventions illuminate the way acting choices reflect other cinematic choices. The 1936, 1968, and 1996 adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* provide useful material for considering the integral connection between acting choices and filmic choices.

In MGM's 1936 film of *Romeo and Juliet,* performance elements are designed to suit framing, editing, production, and sound-design selections that combine to create a theatrical presentation. For this film, the last he would produce before his death, Irving Thalberg assembled a production team that included George Cukor, who had been entrusted to direct other prestige pictures for MGM, Cedric Gibbons as the supervising art director, and William H. Daniels, who had established his reputation as Garbo's cinematographer. The decision to cast forty-two-year-old Leslie Howard as Romeo and thirty-seven-year-old Norma Shearer (Mrs. Thalberg) as Juliet reflects the era's view that great acting depended on great actors' interpretations of great roles.

Portrayals in previous films allowed contemporary audiences to see Howard and Shearer as lovers made young by their innocence; in their portrayals of Romeo and Juliet, the two actors convey the youth of their characters by using gestures, facial expressions, and vocal choices that could be interpreted by their audiences as childlike. Their performances are filled with soft, gentle, carefully modulated movements, avoiding anything quick, rigid, or angular. Their facial expressions convey openness, hopefulness, and quiet interest. They never frown, glare, or narrow their eyes, and their voices feature melodious tones and wistful lilts, never harsh, angry cries or anguished screams.

The ethereal but measured quality of the performance details accords with the film's overall design, which features wide shots and sets of vast scale. As orchestrated, the long shots and huge sets make Howard and Shearer seem smaller, more vulnerable, and more youthful. Deep-focus cinematography draws viewers into the fantasy world surrounding the lovers. Long takes and long shots create space around the lead actors that helps to convey the sincerity of the characters' lofty sentiments, the purity of their souls, and the elegiac tragedy of their suffering. Framed by Gibbons's impressive sets and Daniels's deep-focus cinematography, the performance details convey the idea that the lovers are graced by purity of spirit.

Drawing on the model of traditional proscenium staging, the MGM production shows the audience a theatrical space that allows performers to take center stage. In the scene when Romeo and Juliet first meet, Shearer enters the ballroom upstage center. Diagonal lines of dancers begin at the outside borders of the frame and end where Shearer enters, marking her as the clear focal point of both the set and the frame. A long dance sequence keeps Shearer at the center of attention, with Howard's point-of-view shots following her movements through the room. As if to suggest the purity of Romeo's gaze, the medium long shots of Howard place him against an empty background that highlights his graceful carriage and delicate, patrician features.

Photo 1: Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer as Romeo and Juliet (1936).

The line of action that begins with Howard entering the ballroom and ends with him dancing with Shearer is presented in five wide shots. Their initial meeting and their private encounter, which takes place in three connected playing areas, is presented in one long take. The choreography of actors and camera movement takes Howard and Shearer from the public dancing area to the private space of a balcony and then even closer to the audience when the actors stand at the balcony's edge. The sequence closes when Juliet/Shearer asks her nurse to find out the name of her new lover; then a long take shows Shearer moving slowly away from the camera down a long hallway as a servant extinguishes the lights one by one.

Throughout the dance sequence that allows Romeo to approach Juliet, the gestures of the lead players and the surrounding figures are stately, mannered, and suited to public performance. Even after Howard and Shearer move away from the other dancers to exchange private words and a kiss, their encounter remains entirely chaste. The actors present audiences with carefully selected pictures of childlike flirtation. Their eyes stay wide open; they seem to float close to one another and then gently pull back. Their melodic voices are lightly expressive. Portrayed by Howard and Shearer, Romeo and Juliet are youthful because they are virginal and inexperienced; their love is romantic in its purity. There is no suggestion of physical desire in their gestures or expressions. The sound design contributes to the impressions created by the design of the film's framing, editing, setting, and performance elements. The actors' physical gestures and facial expressions never interfere with their deliveries. Instead, the perfectly balanced tableaux that Howard and Shearer create at each stage of their encounter serves to emphasize the lines they deliver in clear mid-Atlantic accents. Their performances indicate a great deal of control, for Howard and Shearer both speak with a stillness and composure that allows audiences to absorb and enjoy the ornate language and the impressive picture conveyed by their presence in the grand hall. Emblematic of the fact that film design depends on orchestrating and choreographing numerous elements—from framing and editing choices to selection and combination of performance details to choices about sound mixing—the sound design of this 1936 film is consistent with the other aspects of the film's design because it presents audiences with lines spoken in a theatrical space. As we will see, that choice distinguishes it from the 1968 and 1996 films, which feature close miking and postdubbing that convey the impression that audiences are

overhearing the young lovers' most intimate words, breaths, and interior monologues.

Franco Zeffirelli's lush 1968 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is quite different from MGM's 1936 production, but it also provides clear evidence that choices about acting are on par with filmmakers' choices about other cinematic elements. Here again it is possible to see that performances are not created simply by framing and combining shots; instead, the selection and combination of performance elements are as important to the film's overall design as are the selection and combination of its other components. Zeffirelli's decision to cast seventeen-year-old Olivia Hussey and eighteen-year-old Leonard Whiting reveals that a significant shift in ideas about acting had occurred since 1936. Hussey and Whiting were quite experienced actors —Hussey began dramatic training as a child and had appeared in small theater and film roles, and Whiting had been in long-running theatrical productions since the age of twelve—but compared with Shearer and Howard they were unknowns. Thus, rather than adhering to the notion that audiences wanted to see a great actor's interpretation of a part, it was assumed that audiences of the 1960s wanted to see "authentic" emotion on screen.

Casting teenagers in the lead parts also reflects the film's overall conception, for Zeffirelli uses Romeo and Juliet to represent the youth of the 1960s. Situated thirty years after the MGM production and nearly thirty years before Baz Luhrman's postmodern extravaganza, Zeffirelli's British-Italian production is a study in operatic cinema verité. In contrast to the ethereal 1936 black and white film, Zeffirelli's adaptation is filled with rich colors and sweeping movements. Its aesthetic models do not derive from Broadway theater or classical Hollywood. Instead, the film's sumptuous design and musically driven dialogue show the influence of opera, which revels in overwhelming production design and emotional waves of music. Zeffirelli replaces the reverence of the 1936 production with an anthem to the generation that responded to rock operas, civil service strikes in May 1968, and the worldwide protests against the war in Vietnam.

The cinematography of Pasqualino de Santis provides an ornate visual tapestry that is consonant with the actors' sensually realistic performances. Compositions select and frame the actors' naturalistic gestures and expressions. In the ballroom sequence, frame selections range from wide shots to extreme close-ups. The young actors' eyes and faces become isolated momentarily, set off from the colorful and continuous movement of the dancers and onlookers. Subjective point-of-view shots suggest the thoughts of the young lovers and eyeline match shots bring audiences into their

Photo 2: Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey as Romeo and Juliet (1968).

developing flirtation. In this film, viewers are allowed to eavesdrop on the lovers' first meeting, brought so close that the intimacy of their furtive connection is conveyed and authenticated by deep breathing, flushed cheeks, and quivering hands.

In the sequence that allows audiences to witness Romeo and Juliet's first kiss, shot selection is, for the most part, restricted to medium shots, medium close-ups, close-ups, and extreme close-ups. Frame composition features tight shots of faces and bodies. The audience is pulled into the scene by motivated point-of-view shots. From beginning to end, the searching eyes of the young lovers are almost crowded out by the disinterested figures of the older generation. While the 1936 film uses fewer than twenty shots to present the lovers' first meeting, the 1968 film presents that meeting in four sequences, each of about thirty shots: Romeo sees Juliet; Romeo and Juliet exchange glances as participants in the dance; during the ballad, Romeo finds Juliet in the crowd and takes her into the private area behind the pillar; and Juliet's nurse intrudes on the lovers.

The ballad sequence begins with shots that emphasize Romeo and Juliet's search for one another in the crowd. The lovers' young faces are often framed by older characters placidly watching and listening to the ballad. Short point-of-view shots convey the lovers' urgent desire to see one another. Once they finally connect, tight shots of their eyes, faces, and hands convey their impatience and uncertainty, as Romeo reaches for Juliet's hand and two characters slip behind the curtain.

Once they are behind the curtain, a long take that follows them through three units of action helps to create a sense of their intimacy and connectedness. Each phrase of dialogue is like a musical passage given its own framing and setting. The actors are gently enclosed within the frame; the pillar that first separated them becomes a wall that protects them from the others in the public hall. A banquet table in their enclosure, filled with food, glasses, and bottles of wine, gives their brief encounter a softness and sensuality, and a golden stained-glass window provides a radiant frame around Hussey's face in the moments before she is kissed, making visual the saintly images of the formal sonnet the two lovers compose as prelude to their kiss. When the sequence ends with the lovers' embrace, the tighter framing echoes the intimacy created by the choreography of performance that keeps Hussey's face hidden from view.

Here again, the coordination between acting choices and choices about framing, editing, and set design is extended to choices about sound design. In the 1968 film, the sound track is dense with dialogue, music, and background sound. Whiting's and Hussey's voices are as melodic and mid-Atlantic as those of Howard and Shearer. Yet the sound design makes the sensuous gasps of the young actors as important as their words. Editing choices (short takes of tight shots) direct our attention to the physical signs of the lovers' attraction. Their wide-open eyes and youthful faces become signs of romantic love, their breath a physical symptom of desire. Like Shearer and Howard, Hussey and Whiting deliver their lines in trained voices. All of their words are clearly articulated. Intonations and inflections serve to clarify the meaning of more arcane terms. Pronunciations bear no trace of specific class or ethnic background. Yet Hussey's and Whiting's measured phrasing gives their speech a musical quality, and their intimate sounds enhance and sometimes replace spoken words. These acting choices are echoed by tighter framing and close miking, which allow for barely whispered lines, create an impression of intimate proximity, and strengthen the coherence between acting choices, framing choices, and sound-design choices.

In Baz Luhrman's 1996 televisual adaptation of the Romeo and Juliet story, acting choices are again coordinated with choices about the film's other cinematic elements. The actors' physical signs of heightened emotion, caught in tight frame compositions, are one element in a larger chaotic collage cluttered with bizarre costumes, frenetic camera movements, and dizzying editing patterns. Designed to be quite

different from Thalberg's stately proscenium images and Zeffirelli's lush renderings of stained-glass windows and sixteenth-century tapestries, the 1996 film, starring twenty-two-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio and seventeen-year-old Claire Danes, draws its images from a lexicon that includes news broadcasts, comics, teen magazines, MTV videos, and *Miami Vice* episodes. Luhrman and his collaborators, production designer Catherine Martin, cinematographer Donald McAlpine, and editor Jill Babcock, present Romeo and Juliet's ill-fated love as something suited for television news and music videos.

The film's variety of allusions gives audiences familiar entry points to the story of the young lovers. In place of the fairy tale world that the 1936 film implicitly sets against the harsh economic realities of the 1930s, and in place of the generational conflict expressed throughout the 1968 film, Luhrman's film gives voice to young consumers' impossible desire to author their own images in a world of commercial, ready-made images. In the 1996 film, the star-crossed lovers represent the impossibility of an authentic life in a postmodern society that fragments genuine experience in the effort to turn a profit.

Given its underlying conception, the film uses the actors' bodies and voices are bearers of authentic physiological signs, and the significance of those signs emerges through their integration into the overall design of the film. Like the characters themselves, the details of the actors' performances belong to a world that simply does not include perfectly modulated voices or even measured musical phrases. Instead, the media-saturated world can accommodate only fleeting and off-balance embraces, awkward voices that crack with emotion, and flat, nasal Los Angeles accents that rarely shift in tone. In this culture, lovers remain continually exposed, so the actors appear with little or no makeup, and their performances are choreographed so that there are only a few, frantic moments when they are out of public view. In this world, one would not see an intimate exchange enclosed in a private space; instead, one would find telling pieces of intimate gesture and expression whipped into the audiovisual mixture. The film's overall design uses sudden shifts in the actors' energy and in the handheld camera movements to create an overwhelming sense of instability. It contrasts wide shots of frenetic crowds with extremely tight shots of the lovers locked in their embrace to show that the lovers' sincere affection serves only to isolate them from the cynical world that will always control their lives.

The sound design completes the chaotic, unstable impression created by the film's coordination between acting and framing choices. In the sixty-shot sequence that begins when the lovers' hands first touch behind the pillar, the film shifts from one sound-design choice to another—sometimes the actors are close miked, other times their voices are heard from a distance, still other times the musical score completely covers the giggles, gasps, and groans we can see in the flurry of images that depict the first tentative touch of hands and subsequent passionate, swirling, and inter-

Photo 3: Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes in *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (1996).

rupted embraces. Like every other aspect of the 1996 film, the disjointed sound design is integrated into the film's process of selection and combination that creates meaning out of disparate elements boiled down to their simplest components.

The thread running through all three adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* is the equal weight given to framing, editing, production, sound, and performance choices. In the 1936 film, the dreamlike quality of the cinematography and set design resonates with the ethereal feeling created by the actors' controlled and modulated vocal and physical gestures. In Zeffirelli's 1968 film, musical phrases created by framing, editing, miking, and line reading come together in moments anchored by the actors' intimate physical and vocal expressions. In Luhrman's 1996 film, performance details resonate with other audiovisual elements drawn from a dizzying array of social and cinematic allusions. Interestingly, differences between the three adaptations actually help to show how acting choices fit into the overall design of the films. Considered together, the films underscore the fact that choices about framing, editing, production, and sound design are also implicitly choices about performance. Locating the integral place of acting choices makes it possible to set aside the entrenched view that film performances are produced by the assemblage of gestures and expressions that, in themselves, carry no connotations.

In sum, the case studies highlight the fact that the selection and combination of actors' movements, gestures, and facial and vocal expressions have a relationship to a film's selection and combination of shots, editing patterns, design elements, and audio choices. The differences between the three films reveal that the selection and combination of gestures and vocal/facial expressions are elements in the *performance montage* that actors and directors create. These case studies also remind us that film performances reflect the diversity of film practice. Like the contributions of other members of a production team, the work of

performers is designed to contribute to the style of a film as whole, and the differences between the case study films reveal that performance elements are not simply inert matter given meaning by directors, cinematographers, and editors. Instead, as Eisenstein proposed, individual images necessarily carry distinct tonal qualities—which are often shaped by the quality of the actors' gestures and expressions. Acting choices are filmic choices because montage, the process of selection and combination, is the essence of cinema.

Appendix: Sample Handouts for Class or Workshop Study

Acting choices/framing choices— considerations for filmmakers and film scholars:

1. The *selection and combination* of gestures and vocal/facial expressions are mutually interactive elements in the *performance montage* that actors/directors create.
2. In any scene, the *selection and combination* of actors' movements, gestures, facial and vocal expressions have a mutually interactive relationship with the *selection and combination* of shots, editing patterns, design elements, and audio choices.
3. Choices about framing, editing, production and sound design are choices about performance; acting choices are also choices about other cinematic elements.

Romeo and Juliet (1936)
Irving Thalberg, producer

George Cukor (director), William H. Daniels (DP), Cedric Gibbons (art director).

Forty-two-year-old Leslie Howard (Romeo), thirty-seven-year-old Norma Shearer/Mrs. Thalberg (Juliet).

Directorial vision: Romeo and Juliet reveal the sparkling radiance of pure souls whose chaste but passionate attraction is a fairytale; like Mary Pickford heroines and Douglas Fairbanks heroes, their dreamlike affair is inspiring but fated to change.

Theatrical model: long shots and long takes; speeches are presented in dramatic space.

Polished, choreographed performances draw audiences into fictional, other-worldly realm.

Sequence when lines are exchanged during first kiss: one long take/three playing areas.

Romeo and Juliet (1968)

Franco Zeffirelli (director), Pasqualino de Santis (DP), Lorenzo Mongaiardino (designer).

Eighteen-year-old Leonard Whiting (Romeo), seventeen-year-old Olivia Hussey (Juliet).

Directorial vision: Romeo and Juliet embody the purity of the May 68 generation, whose idealism is misunderstood by an older generation bent on endless bloodshed.

Cinematic model: MCU/CUs, short and long takes; choreography of staging and framing to create close-ups; searching eyes and POV shots place audience inside the scene; meaning created by interactions with props and combinations of voice, movement, gesture, and lighting design; close-miked vocal expressions overheard.

Performances are part of a film's overall "musical" composition; framing, editing, design, audio, and acting choices provide an audio-visual illustration of emotional beats.

Sequence when lines are exchanged during first kiss: ten shots in curtained, offstage area.

William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet (1996)

Baz Luhrman (director), Donald McAlpine (DP), Catherine Martin (art director).

Twenty-two-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio (Romeo), seventeen-year-old Claire Danes (Juliet).

Directorial vision: Romeo and Juliet's desire to author their own images in a ready-made image world is ill-fated because "authentic" expressions of personal desire are used as marketable commodities (e.g., in the film and its ancillary market releases).

Televisual model: CU/ECUs, very short takes; dialogue and interior thoughts overheard; facial expressions and hand gestures convey characters' "authentic" emotions while the excitement of the moment is shown by zip pans, quick cuts, twirling camera.

Sequence when lines are exchanged: sixty shots in sideline and elevator spaces.

Using the Case Studies in a Class or Workshop

Show the three-minute segments discussed in the essay. In the 1936 film, it starts at thirty minutes; in the 1968 film, at thirty-three minutes; in the 1996 film, at thirty minutes.

Or show the entire fifteen-minute scene of the Capulet ball in each film. In the 1936 film, it begins at twenty-three minutes; in the 1968 film, at twenty-two minutes (ch. 5 on the DVD); in the 1996 film, at twenty-four minutes (ch. 7 on the DVD).

Or prior to watching the scenes of the Capulet ball, show the opening scene from each of the three adaptations.

Have students read the case study scene before or after watching the adaptations; do a staged reading of the scene in class; have students write their own treatment of the scene.

Ask students to locate a comparable case study; have them outline their findings in class presentations, writing assignments, or media-rich presentation documents.

Ask students to develop three different treatments of a scene they would like to tape/film; use the three adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* (or three other films) as sample approaches.

Have students reproduce ten to thirty seconds from one or more of the case study scenes.

Select exercises from Patrick Tucker's *Secrets of Screen Acting* (esp. 192–94). Using a frame (wood, rolled newspapers, etc.) 4 units × 3 or 16 units × 9:

1. Hold up the frame; have someone watch from about eight feet away; have students stand so that the observer sees them in long shot, medium shot, etc.
2. Put the frame in front of someone doing an ordinary activity like drinking a glass of water; discuss the adjustments needed

for the action to make sense at different distances; use the frame to create different framings of a person asking someone for directions; discuss the adjustments needed for each frame selection.

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